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Israel's Black Hebrews

American Sect Raises Troublesome Questions On Determining Right to Settle in Jewish State

By William Claiborne
Washington Post Foreign Service

DIMONA, Israel — Ben-Ami Carter, "divine prince of princes" of the Black Hebrews, stood in the shade of a date palm tree in an oasis-like park in this remote Negev desert town, a beatific smile spreading across his face as he watched two dozen of his young subjects perform gymnastic exercises with practiced precision.

One by one, his lieutenants approached him, bowing reverently as they address him as "father," and, occasionally, "master." They embraced him warmly, stepping respectfully aside at his nod of dismissal.

The children, drawn from the "Kingdom School of Holiness" at a moment's notice to impress a visitor, tumbled obediently across the lawn, performing cartwheels, backflips and human pyramids as visual proof of their fitness.

"You see, they have no swollen bellies and bowed legs. Do they look to you like they are beaten and abused, and suffering from malnutrition and disease?" Carter asked. "There is a smear campaign, a systematic program of pro-

paganda by racists in the upper echelons of the Israeli society," he added.

The bitterness in Carter's voice underlined the intensity of an 11-year struggle between the government of Israel and the 1,500 black Americans belonging to the cult of the Black Hebrews, who came to Israel as illegal immigrants contending that they are the descendants of ancient tribes of Israel who were exiled to Africa and sold into slavery.

The conflict, which has simmered behind the scenes for more than a decade — occasionally surfacing in the Israeli press to the irritation and embarrassment of various governments — touches the nerve ends of the Israeli conscience. It raises fundamental questions about who is a Jew and to whom the doors of the Jewish state should be opened.

The debate is heating up once again, partly because of new allegations by Black Hebrew defectors that Ben-Ami Carter holds sway over his followers with bizarre, messianic rituals that recall the Peoples Temple cult in Jones.

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Black Hebrews Raise Questions for Israel

HEBREWS, From A1

town, Guyana, and partly because of a controversial recommendation by a parliamentary committee that the group be given legal, permanent status in Israel.

The government has refused to accept the committee's recommendation, but at the same time it is unwilling to expel the Black Hebrews, for fear of exposing Israel to charges of racism and exacerbating tensions between blacks and Jews in the United States.

The Black Hebrews, seemingly aware of the government's dilemma, have begun to temper their militantly anti-white and anti-Israel stance, saying they are willing to stop increasing their membership with black Americans who, posing as Christian pilgrims, enter Israel on tourist visas and then remain here illegally.

Carter and his followers have also intensified a campaign to improve the cult's image, an effort they concede is partly designed to offset expected damage from the publication next month of a book by a former member, Tommy Whitfield, which purports to document his nine years as a Black Hebrew.

Whitfield speaks of mysterious "disappearances" of cult members, marriages ordered by Carter, and unnatural punishments inflicted on members, including beatings, imprisonment, the shaving of heads, the confiscation of property and money, and forcing of violators to wander in the desert for 40 days.

Undocumented and usually unattributed accounts of other alleged abuses have also appeared in Israeli newspapers, including stories of bodies being carried out of the cult's quarters at night and threats of mass suicide.

These reports are vehemently denied by Carter and his followers, and are dismissed as unfounded by the investigatory committee headed by parliamentary member David Glass. One of Carter's "princes," Gershon Ben-Israel, said some youths are punished by "lead shaving to 'shame' them, and that occasionally youths are punished by 'good old-fashioned thrashings.'"

Many Israeli residents of Dimona, including the mayor, Jacques Azoulay, are unhappy about the "squalid and crowded living conditions" of some Black Hebrews, also maintain that rumors of the cult's activities are grossly exaggerated.

Several infants have died, apparently from protein deficiency caused by the cult's adherence to a strict vegetarian diet, which prohibits even milk and

dairy products. Also, overcrowding in the cult's quarters here — and in similar communities in the Negev desert towns of Arad and Mizpeh Ramon — has been serious, with as many as 20 people living in a room.

However, the government, in what Carter interprets as a sign of acceptance, has given the Black Hebrews a sprawling housing complex that once was a Jewish immigrants' processing center. The 100 apartments there will improve the group's living standard, he said.

Carter, 40, a former foundry worker from Chicago, began bringing his followers to Israel in August 1969, after unsuccessfully trying to settle in Liberia. He said he had a vision in 1966 "to establish the prophetic kingdom of God" in Israel.

The softness of his voice and features hardened at the mention of rumors that the Black Hebrews have vowed to commit mass suicide if forced to leave Israel.

"A smear campaign, systematic propaganda. Before Jonestown, did anybody suggest we would do this? We don't have any suicidal tendencies. This is an attempt to set us up," Carter said, his voice rising.

"The ancient Hebrews were a black race of people, and they say I'm racist. There is a parallel between the Israelis and J. Edgar Hoover. The Israelis are waging a personal vendetta to destroy me. This fear of us is like the fear of 2,000 years ago, when Jesus was feared by the people in authority. No unrighteous government can stand on this land," Carter added.

Asked what his people would do if forced to leave, Carter replied, "I feel if they send soldiers and the police, they could probably succeed in getting two-thirds of us out. The other third they would have to kill."

For now, Carter and his followers hope the government will change its mind and accept the Glass committee report, letting them remain.

Meanwhile, Israeli immigration authorities have begun to tighten controls on blacks entering Israel at Ben-Gurion Airport, even turning away some American black pilgrims who have no apparent connection with the Black Hebrews.

"It's a real problem. We have 250,000 American pilgrims here each year, and we estimate at least 10 percent are black. How can Israel keep all black Americans out?" asked a Christian clergyman in Jerusalem.